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WHO urged to make respirator masks the standard for workers in “all healthcare settings”

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Doctors, scientists, and public health experts have urged the World Health Organization (WHO) to recommend that healthcare workers wear respirators “in every encounter in all healthcare settings.”

The letter—seen by *The BMJ*—calls for WHO to update its infection prevention and control guidance to recommend that staff wear respirators such as N95, FFP2/3, and elastomeric masks as standard practice and “not just during outbreaks or high risk procedures.”

It argues that not doing so is “scientifically indefensible” and “dangerous,” as it would continue to expose staff and patients to “preventable and potentially even lethal risk” from pathogens such as SARS-CoV-2.

Around 50 experts—including Martin McKee, professor of European public health at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, and Trisha Greenhalgh, professor of primary care health sciences at the University of Oxford—have endorsed the letter.

Although they think that wearing respirators should be the default, the authors add that WHO could recommend that governments and healthcare leaders establish criteria for when respirators need not be used.

They said that this should be based on a “local and transparent risk assessment of factors such as community infection rates, CO₂ (or viral) levels in room air, and the use of far UV light, HEPA filtration, or other environmental controls.”

“We are deeply alarmed that WHO continues to support policies allowing healthcare workers to wear surgical masks—or no respiratory protection at all—when caring for patients. This position is not only scientifically indefensible but also dangerous,” the letter says.

Current WHO guidance recommends that healthcare staff wear a respirator or a medical mask when caring for patients with suspected or confirmed covid-19 and when performing aerosol generating procedures, such as tracheal intubation.¹

Speaking to *The BMJ*, co-author of the letter Adam Finkel—clinical professor of environmental health sciences and former chief regulatory official at the US Occupational Safety and Health Administration—said: “It would be a profound but easily accommodated change [from current practice].”

He said that, although he’s aware that there may be “pushback” to the idea, the authors “took the position that we should request what we really think is necessary.”

“There are compromises that can be made, but we wanted to come out of the gate saying ‘this is how it should be.’”

He added that healthcare workers are “lifesavers and should do their best to avoid exposing their patients and staff to airborne infections that are easily transmitted.”

Politicisation of masks

Commenting on the letter, Stephen Griffin—professor of cancer virology at the University of Leeds and co-chair of Independent SAGE, who was not involved in the letter—said that WHO recommending respirators could reduce the stigma associated with masks.

He told *The BMJ* that “airborne transmission has been overlooked from an infection prevention and control perspective” despite ongoing transmission of SARS-CoV-2 and “relentless seasonal epidemics of influenza and [respiratory syncytial virus].”

Griffin said that it was important to remember that healthcare settings “represent a crucible of disease transmission” and that respirator masks “are incredibly effective in terms of reducing disease transmission.”

He added that there are other interventions, such as air filtration and improved ventilation, that should also be adopted to protect both staff and patients.

Turning to the wider conversation around masks, Griffin said their use has been “heavily politicised and weaponised by certain groups in society” and that WHO’s endorsement could “improve matters.”

“A cultural shift towards the practical acceptance of such measures and the lack of stigma seen in Asian countries, accompanied by other interventions, could radically improve public health and profoundly reduce the pressure on the NHS both during the winter months and throughout the year,” he said.

“WHO has a responsibility to stand against misinformation and to ensure that public health advice remains evidence based and for the benefit of all, so if the recommendations of this letter can be integrated into this mission then so much the better for it.”

In light of the current flu season—which started early and saw rocketing case numbers—some health officials in England have urged people to wear masks to slow the spread of respiratory illnesses.²

Responding to the letter, a WHO spokesperson said they are carefully reviewing it.

They said: “WHO’s recommendations are for global use and take into consideration the values and

preferences, resource implications, equity, acceptability, and feasibility of the use of masks and respirators in all countries and contexts, including in low and middle income countries.

“National authorities consider WHO’s global recommendations to update for local contexts and realities.

“We are currently reviewing WHO’s Infection Prevention and Control guidelines for epidemic and pandemic-prone acute respiratory infections, based on the latest scientific evidence to ensure ongoing protection of health workers.”

- 1 World Health Organization. Coronavirus disease (covid-19): masks. 12 Oct 2023. <https://www.who.int/news-room/questions-and-answers/item/coronavirus-disease-covid-19-masks>
- 2 Iacobucci G. Masks and flu: What is the debate, and should you wear one? *BMJ* 2025;391: doi: 10.1136/bmj.r2631. pmid: 41386782